

SAFETY AT SEA

US Sailing's seminars offer valuable advice for sailors preparing to venture offshore



by Rich Pinkowitz

Can you think the unthinkable? You are offshore and the circle from your boat to the horizon is just blue and you. Then a problem arises. Someone falls ill, or the boat starts taking on water, or the mast fails and

topples, or, well, fill in your worst dream. Sea tow is not in the neighborhood, and you are beyond the 300-nautical-mile U.S. Coast Guard limit for reasonable rescue by helicopter (even in sight of land a Coast Guard

helicopter will take nearly an hour to get to you). You are on your own. Have you prepared for these emergencies?

Safety-at-Sea Seminars, sponsored by US Sailing, in one day bring together experts that can



Personal Safety Afloat

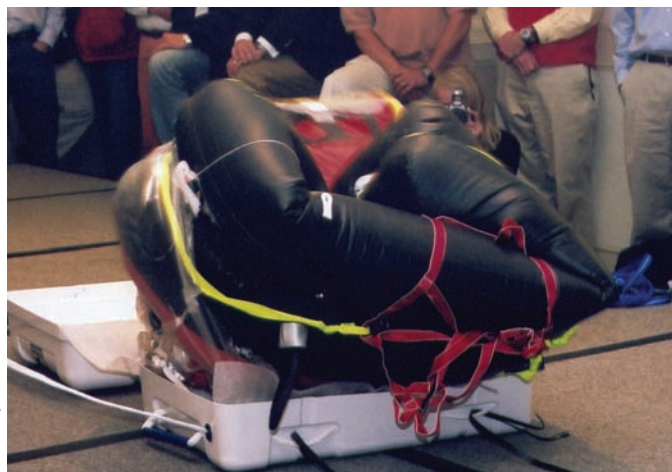
help sailors prepare for those unimaginable events that may happen offshore. I attended the March 2006 Safety-at-Sea Seminar in Newport, R.I. It was intended mainly for the racers participating in the Newport Bermuda Race to be held in June, but it was open to any interested person.

It was not a day of horror stories—crew overboard and lost, fingers mashed or heart attack victims—but a day of mental preparation for the possibility of an adverse event at sea. Ron Trossbach, of US Sailing, was the knowledgeable and experienced moderator, and among the many speakers John Rousmaniere gave his practical advice about crew overboard based on his experiences at the 2005 Crew Overboard Recovery Symposium (see “Crew-overboard recovery” on page 60). Jef D’Etiveaud, the captain of *Mari Cha IV*, offered his recommendations for sailing in heavy weather. Practical experience in his case is managing a boat that has nearly 150-foot masts. Lee Chesneau of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) challenged us and then lucidly explained the range of offshore weather charts and information that NOAA puts up on the web daily. The charts found on the NOAA website, <http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/marine/home.htm>, are worthy of the time spent browsing and understanding them.

A brief talk by Lt. Sean Krueger, rescue helicopter pilot at Air Station Cape Cod, and Petty Officer Brian Krueger, a rescue swimmer, discussed the Coast Guard’s assets and equipment used in a recovery. We then

adjourned to the bay side of the hotel to watch a demonstration of signal flares and then a live helicopter rescue of a swimmer.

The flare demonstration started with a 12-gauge flare with a 250-foot elevation, six-second burn time and five-mile visibility and worked its way up to the SOLAS flares with nearly 1,000-foot elevation, 40-second burn time and 30-mile visibility. They also shot off a few SOLAS flares of expired vintage and found that they did perform, although the burn time was not quite as long as the newer SOLAS flares. It reminded me that while the SOLAS flares are expensive, offshore you need the greater visibility and longer burn to increase the possibility of being seen.



Photos by Rich Pinkowitz

Next a swimmer jumped into the 40-degree Narragansett Bay and waited for the helicopter to arrive. We were 300 feet away, and the swimmers head was barely visible in the calm waters. At six knots a boat travels 300 feet in 30 seconds, the time it might take a good crew to come about to return to the crew overboard. Imagine a crew overboard in bigger seas, which is why the first step in crew-overboard recovery is to have a spotter keep watch on the crew in the water.

The helicopter rescue was a slow and quite deliberate maneu-

ver. After circling and surveying the situation the helicopter slowly came close to sea level, and the swimmer jumped into the water. Then came the basket for the crew overboard. Once the basket is in the helicopter the rescue crew drops the line down to the rescue swimmer, who then hooks on and is raised back aboard.

US Sailing publishes two books of value to all offshore sailors, *Safety Recommendations for Cruising Sailboats*, and the *US Edition 2006-2007 ISAF Offshore Special Regulations Governing Offshore Racing for Monobulls & Multibulls*. The International Sailing Federation (ISAF) and US Sailing have established requirements and recommendations for required equipment; vessel design and safety function for vessels in races offshore as well as inland.

Ron Trossbach reminded me of two important lessons about safety. First, safety is an attitude. In addition to buying safety equipment you will need to prioritize safety by enforcing safe procedures among the crew. Second, practice of all maneuvers by the crew is paramount so that in an emergency everyone knows their roles and has practiced the necessary skills. When the unprepared confront the unexpected, emergencies escalate into disasters.



For a listing of upcoming Safety-at-Sea Seminars go to US Sailing’s website at www.ussailing.org.

